

Transforming the Learning Experience Through Ungrading

The conventional 100-point scale of grading has been the common standard for evaluating students' progress and comprehension of material since the early 20th century (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Despite the ubiquity of numerical and letter grades in education, there is a growing body of research evidencing the detrimental effects traditional grading methods can have on students' learning and development. Current grading systems can hamper students' cooperation in group assignments (Hayek et al. 2015); diminish students' interest in learning a subject; encourage a preference for the easiest tasks; reduce the quality and thoroughness of their thinking (Kohn, 2013); lower affective and behavioral engagement, particularly in lower-achieving students (Poorthuis et al. 2015); and create a performance-focused environment that can promote dishonest academic practices (Daumiller & Janke, 2020). Ungrading has emerged as an increasingly popular, alternative evaluation method for educators to counteract the negative effects of traditional grading and improve student outcomes and motivation.

What Is Ungrading?

Ungrading, also referred to as de-grading or going gradeless (Blum, 2020), is an iterative process that involves co-constructive dialogue and feedback. It is a liberatory educational praxis that decenters the power differential between instructors and students. Moreover, ungrading is a pedagogical practice that seeks to move away from "objective" systematic grading systems. There is no single methodology for educators to incorporate ungrading in their classes. In general, ungrading is an umbrella term referring to the use of any alternative methods to the established practice of the instructor assigning numerical or letter grades to students' work (Stommel, 2020).

While there are a growing number of colleges and universities going grade-optional or grade-free (Blum, 2020), most community colleges still require that courses end with students receiving a final letter grade. When these final grades are unavoidable, ungrading strategies focus on using transparency and formative feedback to involve students in their own learning and evaluation as much as possible. Some colleges explicitly forbid the use of specific ungrading strategies like grading contracts (Katopodis & Davidson, 2020), so instructors will need to check with their academic department office before making any final implementation decisions.

Why Ungrade?

Many students have been conditioned to view letter grades as the most important indicator of their progress and success in

learning (Stommel, 2020). Ungrading encourages educators to replace the use of traditional grading with a system that focuses on the learning process. Stommel contends that grades should not be used as an incentive for students as they encourage students to "value the product over the process." Further, grades are not a definitive marker for academic excellence. For example, a 4.0 GPA may be a result of studiousness or it could be attributed to compromising morals for the sake of maintaining a strong grade point average (Stommel, 2020).

Current research shows growing support for the use of ungrading practices in place of traditional grading. Guberman (2021) found that an online, ungraded course that used learning reflections yielded strong markers of situational motivations, including intrinsic regulation and identification, and lower scores of extrinsic regulations and amotivation. Implementing ungraded writing assignments has also been shown to increase introductory psychology students' conceptual understanding of the subject and to increase scores on multiple-choice final exams (Drabick et al., 2007). Furthermore, Khanna (2015) found that students who received ungraded pop quizzes performed better on final exams, were less anxious, and felt more positively about having quizzes in their class than those students who received grades.

Ungrading Strategies

Ferguson (2013) provided three key questions for educators to keep in mind when deciding on their ungrading strategy: What kind of learners do you want students to become? What are the skills needed to grow and reach mastery in the course? What are the most important skills and ideas for students to acquire? When these questions are first considered, then instructors can identify ways to integrate ungrading. Stommel (2020) used student self-assessment and process letters. These strategies target markers of progress in learning and challenge students to metacognitively conceptualize and reflect on their learning journeys. He also suggests incorporating peer assessment in group work to help expand students' areas of awareness. Stommel suggested using minimal gradations in classroom rubrics when possible. Instead of highly subjective 100-point gradation scales, using a two-point gradation (pass/fail) or three-point gradation (exemplary, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory) can make expectations more transparent and increase students' intrinsic motivation. Instructors can include students in the process of developing rubrics and grading standards so students are integral parts of assessment design.

In classes where grading cannot be avoided, Stommel (2020) suggests creating grading contracts with students to discuss what an 'A' versus a 'B' might look like without moving the goalpost

and forcing students to reconceptualize their expectations. Grading contracts align with the implementation of the goal approach (Newton et al., 2020). By using learning objectives and course content, the goal approach is designed for students to collaborate with their instructors to determine the specific accomplishments needed for achieving their desired grade. This strategy provides more student autonomy and allows a cooperative approach to determining what constitutes a “mastery level” based on each student’s individual academic performance. Instructors may also provide grades for major assignments and focus on narrative, formative feedback for other assignments aimed at facilitating and enhancing learning.

Newton et al. (2020) suggest the conferencing method when a college requires a letter grade. Like the goal approach, this strategy uses student-instructor collaboration. In the conferencing method, students individually meet with their instructors throughout the semester to discuss their performance and understanding of the course material. This encourages students to have an open dialogue with instructors regarding expectations, due dates, office hours, and revisions/resubmissions of assignments. As the semester concludes, the student and instructor work together to determine what grade they both feel the student has earned.

Marcus Shultz-Bergin (2020) explains how using reflections can help students achieve their goals and enhance their academic development. Students are provided with prompts to reflect on their learning experiences throughout the semester. This allows a personal examination of what learning strategies supported students’ growth and what strategies hindered performance. Reflections help increase students’ comfort in evaluating themselves and can assist with incorporating existing and new learning strategies into their academic experience. This helps to strengthen academic performance in the future and gives students a more active role in determining their grade for the course.

Laura Gibbs (2020) describes an all-feedback-no-grades system of ungrading. With this approach, students are taught to give and receive feedback to better learn from their mistakes and build a more positive relationship with the feedback process. This strategy has been shown to improve students’ weekly academic performance and help students feel more comfortable receiving and responding to constructive criticism. Gibbs explains that she then implements grade-book declarations, which use a “declaration” quiz with true/false statements. Students generate a score by responding either true or false to a checklist with the assignment requirements. That score is then factored in combination with students’ incorporation of feedback to determine a final letter grade for the assignment. This strategy provides students with the opportunity to give input into their overall grade for assignments and use the feedback given to reflect on and enhance their work before completing the declaration quiz.

Theory to Practice: Ungrading a Relationship-First Model

Ungrading embodies the idea that engaging learning activities invite students to demonstrate understanding. Lynch (2014) captures the journey from academic classrooms to workforce training and notes that educators should prepare students for what life and career opportunities unfold. To leverage classroom experiences and intentional connections to workforce readiness through the community college instructor lens, educators can implement a shift in practice involving the following:

- Communicating the intentions of ungrading and ungrading processes.
- Providing opportunities for students to give instructors feedback.
- Establishing a classroom culture and norms centered around the growth mindset. Dweck (2006).
- Shifting from numerical scores to specific feedback.
- Inviting students to use interactive feedback with one another and peer reviews.
- Establishing individual conference sessions to personalize feedback.
- Celebrating and showcasing exceptional work as patterns to strengthen practice.
- Using check-ins and coaching students who require interventions to master class objectives.
- Establishing a classroom culture centered on hope and supporting trauma-informed practices.
- Providing flexible dates for designated assignments and a late pass for students to use as needed.
- Ungrading policies and practices invite educators and students to create a productive learning environment that shifts students’ mindsets away from grades and toward learning. Instructors enhance classroom experiences based on feedback and provide personalized support to student experiences.

Final Thoughts

Students have a variety of lived experiences and have several levels of intersectional marginalization, including racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic status, and accessibility to technology and resources. As a result, historically privileged students with more access to resources may perform better on standardized grading outcomes (Stommel, 2020), while the grades of students in marginalized groups can be negatively impacted by factors outside of their control, such as adverse childhood experiences and increased ethnic-racial discrimination (Zeiders et al., 2021).

To pursue equitable and liberatory teaching practices, it is vital that teachers question power structures within educational systems and establish more democratic learning environments (Stommel, 2020). Although ungrading strategies may generate initial anxiety because they seem unfamiliar, they can provide students and instructors with a more collaborative learning experience that enhances growth and academic expansion (Blum, 2020). By decentering grading, educators allow students to

empower themselves through reflection and process (Stommel, 2020). The intersubjective nature of ungrading allows learners and educators to co-construct meaning, thus challenging students to critically examine and strengthen their learning processes.

Jill Channing, *Assistant Professor*, East Tennessee State University Center for Community College Leadership
Ginger Christian, *Assistant Professor*, East Tennessee State University
Benjamin Patterson, *Graduate Assistant and M.A. Counseling Student*, East Tennessee State University
Megan King, *Graduate Assistant and M.A. Counseling Student*, East Tennessee State University

For more information, contact the author at East Tennessee State University (CCLP), channing@etsu.edu.

References

- Beck, H. P., Rorrer-Woody, S., & Pierce, L.G. (1991). The relations of learning and grade orientations to academic performance. *Teaching of Psychology* 18, 35-37. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top1801_10
- Blum, S.D. (2020). Why ungrade? Why grade? In S.D. Blum (Ed.) *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* (pp. 1-22). West Virginia University Press
- Butler, R. (1988). Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation: The effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1988.tb00874.x>
- Daumiller, M. & Janke, S. (2020). Effects of performance goals and social norms on academic dishonesty in a test. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2), 537-559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12310>
- Drabick, D. A. G., Weisberg, R., Paul, L., & Bubier, J. L. (2007). Keeping it short and sweet: Brief, ungraded writing assignments facilitate learning. *Teaching of Psychology*, 34(3), 172-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986280701498558>
- Dweck, C.S., (2006). *Mindset: the new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Ferguson, H.J. (2013). Journey into ungrading. *Counterpoints*, 451, 194-209.
- Gibbs, L. (2020). Let's talk about grading. In S. D. Blum (Ed.), *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* (pp. 91-104). West Virginia University Press.
- Guberman, D. (2021). Student perceptions of an online ungraded course. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 9(1), 86-98.
- Hayek, A.-S., Toma, C., Oberlé, D., & Butera, F. (2015). Grading hampers cooperative information sharing in group problem solving. *Social Psychology*, 46(3), 121-131. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000232>
- Khanna, M. M. (2015). Ungraded pop quizzes: Test-enhanced learning without all the anxiety. *Teaching of Psychology*, 42(2), 174-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628315573144>
- Kohn, A. (2013). The case against grades. *Counterpoints*, 451, 143-153.
- Lynch, M. (2014). P-16 and P-20 initiatives: Critical for education reform. *Education Week*.
- Newton, J. R., Williams, M. C., & Feeney, D. M. (2020). Implementing non-traditional assessment strategies in teacher preparation: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 3(1), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.03.01.3>
- Poorthuis, A. M. G., Juvonen, J., Thomaes, S., Denissen, J. J. A., Orobio de Castro, B., & van Aken, M. A. G. (2015). Do grades shape students' school engagement? The psychological consequences of report card grades at the beginning of secondary school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 107(3), 842-854. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000002>
- Schinske, J., & Tanner, K. (2014). *Teaching more by grading less (or differently)*. CBE – Life Sciences Education, 13(2), 159-166. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.CBE-14-03-0054>
- Shultz-Bergin, M. Grade anarchy in the philosophy classroom. In S. D. Blum (Ed.), *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* (pp.173-187). West Virginia University Press.
- Stommel, J. (2020). How to ungrade. In S. D. Blum (Ed.), *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* (pp. 25-41). West Virginia University Press.
- Zeiders, K.H., Umaña-Taylor, A.J., Carbajal, S., & Pech, A. (2021). Police discrimination among Black, Latina/x/o, and white adolescents: Examining frequency and relations to academic functioning. *Journal of Adolescence*, 90, 91-99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.001>